

August 22, 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR

THE PRESIDENT

Subject: Conversation with Commandante Ernesto Guevara of Cuba

The conversation took place the evening of August 17 at 2 A. M. Several members of the Brazilian and Argentine delegations had made efforts -- throughout the Punta del Este Conference to arrange a meeting between me and Che. This was obviously done with Che's approval, if not his urging. I had avoided such a meeting during the Conference. On Thursday we arrived in Montevideo and I was invited to a birthday party for the local Brazilian delegate to the Free Trade area. After I arrived, and had been there for about an hour, one of the Argentines present (who had been on the Argentine delegation) informed me they were inviting Che to the party. He arrived about 2 A. M. and told Edmundo Barbosa DaSilva of Brazil and Horation Larretta of Argentine that he had something to say to me. The four of us entered a room, and the following is a summary of what took place. (The Argentine and Brazilian alternated as interpreters).

Che was wearing green fatigues, and his usual overgrown and scraggly beard. Behind the beard his features are quite soft, almost feminine, and his manner is intense. He has a good sense of humor, and there was considerable joking back and forth during the meeting. He seemed very ill at ease when we began to talk, but soon became relaxed and spoke freely. Although he left no doubt of his personal and intense devotion to communism, his conversation was free of propaganda and bombast. He spoke calmly, in a straightforward manner, and with the appearance of detachment and objectivity. He left no doubt, at any time, that he felt completely free to speak for his government and rarely distinguished between his personal observations and the official position of the Cuban government. I had the definite impression that he had thought out his remarks very carefully -- they were extremely well organized.

DECLASSIFIED

E. O. 11652, SEC. 3(E), 5(D), 5(E) AND 11

W. S. Gachinist (WLS-78-26)  
BY hgm NAAS DATE 3/13/78

I told him at the outset that I had no authority to negotiate my country's problems, but would report what he said to interested officials of our government. He said "good" and began.

Guevara began by saying that I must understand the Cuban revolution. They intend to build a socialist state, and the revolution which they have begun is irreversible. They are also now out of the U. S. sphere of influence, and that too is irreversible. They will establish a single-party system with Fidel as Secretary-General of the party. Their ties with the East stem from natural sympathies, and common beliefs in the proper structure of the social order. They feel that they have the support of the masses for their revolution, and that that support will grow as time passes.

He said that the United States must not act on the false assumptions that (a) we can rescue Cuba from the claws of communism (he meant by other than direct military action); (b) that Fidel is a moderate surrounded by a bunch of fanatic and aggressive men, and might be moved to the Western side; (c) that the Cuban revolution can be overthrown from within -- there is, he said, diminishing support for such an effort and it will never be strong enough.

He spoke of the great strength of the Cuban revolution, and the impact it has had on liberal thought throughout Latin America. For example, he said, all the leftwing forces in Uruguay were joining forces under the banner of Cuba. He said civil war would break out in many countries if Cuba were in danger -- and such war might break out in any event. He spoke with great intensity of the impact of Cuba on the continent and the growing strength of its example.

He said that in building a communist state they had not repeated any of the aggressive moves of the East. They did not intend to construct an iron curtain around Cuba but to welcome technicians and visitors from all countries to come and work.

He touched on the matter of the plane thefts. He said he didn't know if I knew but they had not been responsible for any hijackings. The first plane was taken by a young fellow who was a good boy but a little wild and who is now in jail. They suspected that the last plane was taken by a provocateur (a CIA agent). He is afraid that if these thefts keep up it will be very dangerous.

He began to discuss the difficulties of the Alliance for Progress. He asked me if I had heard his speech at the closing of the conference. I said I had listened to it closely. He said that it explained his viewpoint on the Alliance for Progress. (In this speech he said the idea of the Alianza was fine, but it would fail. He spoke also of the play of historical forces working on behalf of communism, etc. -- that there would be either leftist revolutions or rightist coups leading to leftist takeovers, and there was also a strong chance that the commies would get in through popular election.) He then said he wished to add that there was an intrinsic contradiction in the Alianza -- by encouraging the forces of change and the desires of the masses we might set loose forces which were beyond our control ending in a Cuba style revolution. Never once did he indicate that Cuba might play a more direct role in the march of history.

He then said, now that he had discussed our difficulties he would like to discuss his own problems -- and he would like to do so very frankly. There were in Cuba, he said, several basic problems.

1. There was disturbing revolutionary sentiment, armed men and sabotage.
2. The small bourgeoisie were hostile to the revolution or, at best, were lukewarm.
3. The Catholic Church (here he shook his head in dismay).
4. Their factories looked naturally to the U. S. for resources, especially spare parts and at times the shortages of these resources made things very critical.
5. They had accelerated the process of development too rapidly and their hard currency reserves were very low. Thus they were unable to import consumer goods and meet basic needs of the people.

He then said that they didn't want an understanding with the U.S., because they know that was impossible. They would like a Modus vivendi -- at least an interim modus vivendi. Of course, he said, it was difficult to put forth a practical formula for such a modus vivendi -- he knew because he had spent a lot of time thinking about it. He thought we should

put forth such a formula because we had public opinion to worry about whereas he could accept anything without worrying about public opinion.

I said nothing, and he waited and then said that, in any event, there were some things he had in mind.

1. That they could not give back the expropriated properties -- the factories and banks -- but they could pay for them in trade.

2. They could agree not to make any political alliance with the East -- although this would not affect their natural sympathies.

3. They would have free elections -- but only after a period of institutionalizing the revolution had been completed. In response to my question he said that this included the establishment of a one-party system.

4. Of course, they would not attack Guantanamo. (At this point he laughed as if at the absurdly self-evident nature of such a sentiment).

5. He indicated, very obliquely, and with evident reluctance because of the company in which we were talking, that they could also discuss the activities of the Cuban revolution in other countries.

He then went on to say that he wanted to thank us very much for the invasion -- that it had been a great political victory for them -- enabled them to consolidate -- and transformed them from an aggrieved little country to an equal.

Guevara said he knew it was difficult to discuss these things but we could open up some of these issues by beginning to discuss subordinate issues. He suggested discussion of the airplane issue. (Presumably, we would use the airplane issue as a cover for more serious conversation).

He said they could discuss no formula that would mean giving up the type of society to which they were dedicated.

At close he said that he would tell no one of the substance of this conversation except Fidel. I said I would not publicize it either.

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After the conversation was terminated I left to record notes on what had been said. He stayed at the party, and talked with the Brazilian and Argentine.

The Argentine fellow -- Larretta -- called me the next morning to say that Guevara had thought the conversation quite profitable, and had told him that it was much easier to talk to someone of the "newer generation."

The above is substantially a complete account of the entire conversation.

Richard N. Goodwin